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A Bill of Rights, looted long ago, is stolen back

By Patrik Jonsson | Special to The Christian Science Monitor

RALEIGH, N.C. - Though he's known for his work as a bookish appraiser on PBS's "Antiques Roadshow," Wayne Pratt hardly needs to moonlight: In his day job, he's one of New England's most successful antique dealers.

But not long ago, Mr. Pratt - a tall, quiet, slightly balding man with an affinity for heirloom furniture and toys - strayed from his specialty and picked up a long-lost original Bill of Rights, signed by John and Samuel Adams. The document was a perfect match to one stolen from North Carolina's Capitol during Gen. William Sherman's march in 1865. Pratt then made what authorities say was a bad decision: He tried to profit from the public's edicts and the signatures of famous men.

In a sting operation last month, an FBI special agent posing as a Philadelphia philanthropist with a fake \$4 million check persuaded Pratt to sell the Bill. Couriered to Philadelphia, the Bill was seized and squirreled home for the first time in 138 years, to a secure hiding place.

The sting is one of the biggest in US history, collaring what archivists here call a "holy relic" - which, if genuine, would be the last of what were once five missing Bills. The controversy probes the fine line between public and private property, and the question of whether Pratt broke the law when he tried to sell the original American edicts. Now, he's at the center of what could be a criminal investigation - and a case to chill the lucrative, oft-mysterious trade in Colonial charters and famous John Hancocks.

"This may ... affect our industry from the standpoint of the validity of providence and whether we can count on it in the future," says Jim Tucker, director of the Antiques and Collectibles Dealer Association in Cornelius, N.C.

Fourteen Bills of Rights were produced by the First Federal Congress, and George Washington posted them to the 13 soon-to-be states for ratification. Eventually, three went missing and two were burned, but North Carolina's has had the most intriguing adventure. Stolen by an Ohio infantryman when Sherman's troops sacked Raleigh in 1865, it resurfaced twice - in 1897, when news reports placed it on the Indianapolis office wall of Charles Shotwell, who bought it for \$5, and again in 1925, when a Pennsylvania dealer contacted North Carolina. Both times, the state rebuffed negotiations, saying it wouldn't pay for what belonged to the people. Now, the Bill may be worth \$30 million.

"This is property belonging to a sovereign," insists Frank Whitney, the US attorney handling the case here in Raleigh.

Then the Bill disappeared for a lifetime - turning up 70 years later in 1995, when a proxy brought it to the North Carolina Department of Archives and History. At that meeting, a threat was made: Buy it - or we sell it to the Middle East. Meanwhile, two missing copies found their ways to the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library. "They were asking so much money, it was far beyond anything we could have paid," says Jeff Crow, a deputy state archivist who sat in on those talks.

Three years ago, two men and a woman, with two guards, brought a framed Bill to Charlene Bangs Bickford, director of the First Federal Congress Project at George Washington University. They were a shadowy bunch, she says - "no names, no phone numbers, no nothing."

After confirming its authenticity, the conservators wrung their hands about letting the manuscript out of the building. "It's absolutely priceless," says Bickford. But the First Federal Congress Project was reluctant to contact authorities - and risk driving the document further underground.

Finally, in March, the curator at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia called authorities: The Bill had resurfaced. The sting went down a few days later.

While the state has laid claim to the Bill, critics question why archivists here waited so long. In fact, they say, if Pratt can prove that the state failed to go after the Bill in the past, a court may find that the Tarheels abdicated ownership. Pratt has already sued, claiming there's no conclusive evidence that it belongs to North Carolina.

"I would not think this would be a slam-dunk case for North Carolina," says New York manuscript dealer Ken Rendell, who helped debunk the Hitler Diaries and wrote "Forging History."

North Carolina has become a pariah in the manuscript world, reclaiming letters from Thomas Jefferson and a sheaf of stolen archives. Some say the state's hot pursuit of "alienated" documents has made those documents worthless on the open market.

Instead of encouraging collectors to return such documents, some curators fear, the tack could have the opposite effect. "You don't want to intimidate them from coming forward when something's found," says Bickford.

The defining case involved an North Carolina doctor named B.C. West who had a copy of a letter written by William Hooper - a signer of the Declaration of Independence - before North Carolina was a state. The state successfully appealed to its Supreme Court - and has chased missing documents ever since. "We're very unapologetic about it," says Mr. Crow at the State Archives. "These are the people's records and they should be preserved."

Pratt's role remains unclear. He's lost his "Antiques Roadshow" gig, at least for now; colleagues are baffled. Not being a manuscript specialist may have worked against him, fueling awe for a Bill declaring: "[No] private property [shall] be taken for public use, without just compensation."

"I don't see Wayne Pratt doing it for the value," says Mr. Tucker, "as much as just the ability to handle a piece like that."

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